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SUBJECT Desertion In Soviet Army

HUGH DOWNS: Tonight a most unusual report about rare event: desertion by troops of the Soviet Army, Russian soldiers caught in a seemingly endless fight against the Moslem rebels in Afghanistan.

Just within the past week, the rebels made the latest in a series of devastating attacks on Russian-held airfields, further demoralizing Soviet troops, who thought in the beginning they faced an easy enemy.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan is in its fourth year. You remember the events. Christmas Eve of 1979. Russian tanks and troops airlifted to Kabul, the capital. Now there are more than 105,000 troops in Afghanistan. You recall the world turmoil over the invasion. There were United Nations resolutions demanding withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan.

MAN: In favor, 104. Against, 18.

DOWNS: You remember the curtailment of American grain sales to Russia, the boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. And now, increasing reports of Russian atrocities, the mass murder of innocent civilians, and continuing charges of Russian use of chemical warfare.

More than three million Afghans have fled to neighboring Pakistan, one-fifth of the population of Afghanistan. That's the

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largest group of refugees in the world. And the rebels, bolder now and better-armed, are successfully attacking Russian convoys and threatening Soviet-controlled cities. Western intelligence sources estimate Russian casualties at 12 to 15 thousand dead and wounded. Even in the Soviet press, where losses are rarely admitted, there are reports of casualties and stories of hardship for Russian troops in Afghanistan.

And now, something unseen since World War II, Soviet troops deserting, going over to the Afghan rebels. ABC News correspondent Bill Redeker is just back from Afghanistan.

BILL REDEKER: Hugh, we left Afghanistan last week after interviewing several Soviet deserters in a remote mountain stronghold. The camp is located near Kandahar, Afghanistan's second-largest city. The camp is a safe haven controlled by Afghan rebels known as the Mujahidin.

The Mujahidin, holy warriors, praising Allah at a rear-echelon camp in southeast Afghanistan. But look closely, for among them normally atheistic Russian soldiers, defectors who've surrendered to the Afghan rebels: Sergei Mishilokov (?), 26, private. Grisha Sulimanov (?), 20, sergeant. Akram Faisulaiev (?), 20, private. Feyodor Kosinov (?), 20, private. There are other Soviet POWs at this camp. But unlike their comrades here, they've refused to adopt the ways of their Moslem captors. For them, a locked door and an armed guard.

Alexander Zerikovsky (?), 21, sergeant. Valery Kisalov (?), 20, private. Like the others, they deserted, claiming they were misled by their army, which they say commits atrocities in Afghanistan.

TRANSLATOR: Officers told us that Afghanistan is full of foreign mercenaries, and we have to help Afghanistan people to fight that aggression. But it was a pure lie. What aggression? I did not see any aggression here, only Afghanistan people who took arms in their hands to protect their own country. That's all.

REDEKER: To begin with, Sergei, explain to me, why did you leave the Soviet troops and join the Mujahidin here in Afghanistan?

TRANSLATOR: Because I do not want to kill women and children, because the Soviet troops are killing everything that is alive in Afghanistan.

[Unintelligible] realized that this were ordinary people from the settlements. The actual people are Afghanistan.

We were fighting with them. And then it's not so good, I thought, to kill such innocent children and adults. Bombing and killing them is not good.

REDEKER: How widespread is the killing of women and children that you mentioned earlier?

TRANSLATOR: How widespread the practice is, I don't know. They kill everything without count, with any kind of weapon.

REDEKER: What can you tell me about the reported use by the Soviets of chemical warfare?

TRANSLATOR: Yes. When I was going to Khorban (?), I saw pretty good holes with diameters of two meters or so and a meter and a half deep. The soil -- the soil was red there. I don't know. Actually, I'm not a chemist. There are chemical units that they are using the weapons here. That is to say, the Army has chemical units everywhere. The infantry has them. The paratroops. Even the Air Force has its specialists in that field.

REDEKER: For those POWs who agree, daily language instruction and lessons from the Moslem holy book, the Koran. In short, indoctrination by the Mujahidin. In return, these prisoners are allowed more freedom than the others, permitted to roam freely about the camp, and encouraged to join the insurgents in their battles against a Soviet Army increasingly plagued by poor morale.

What is the morale of those soldiers from the Soviet Union now fighting here in Afghanistan?

TRANSLATOR: Not very good. They just have to follow the orders they get from their commanders.

REDEKER: Why isn't the morale very good?

TRANSLATOR: How can I put it? In general, the soldiers don't want to fight with the Afghan people. Nobody wants to fight. All soldiers want to go home to the Soviet Union. Nobody wants to fight. No one. It is better to go back to the Soviet Union and serve prison terms. Nobody wants to fight here in this country.

REDEKER: Valery, why do people feel that way? Why do soldiers and their commanders feel that way?

TRANSLATOR: Well, there are some officers, very bad officers. What attracts them? Why do they come here? They are usually just from a military school. They have to be in the Army for 25 years. And here, one year is counted as two. While back in the Soviet Union, one year is one year. That's the main reason why they want to be here. But there are some officers who do not want to fight here. I cannot tell why they don't want to fight here. I think that some of them are very honest, good people, and they have learned the truth. They want to live in peace with Afghanistan, in peace. They don't want to fight.

REDEKER: What about illicit drugs? For instance, hashish.

TRANSLATOR: It is usually used by the soldiers.

REDEKER: How do they obtain it?

TRANSLATOR: They trade it for their personal belongings, sometimes even ammunition.

REDEKER: What do the people of the Soviet Union think about what's happening in this country?

TRANSLATOR: The Soviet people don't think anything. They don't know who we are fighting. Is it the people of Afghanistan or someone else?

Well, there must be some people now who know. The ones who are demobilized, they explain. They tell those who listen.

The newspapers and television in the Soviet Union are lying to us about Afghanistan. When the Soviet soldier returns home he is sworn not to say a word of what he has seen or done, not a word. He's not to speak to anybody about it, about Afghanistan in general, no matter how some people try to fish for information. The soldier could break down when he's drunk. Yes, that's quite possible. But every soldier is strictly warned about this.

REDEKER: While life is primitive at the Mujahidin camp, all of the prisoners say they receive enough food, though their diet is bland and consists mainly of bread, rice and tea. Medical facilities are also limited, but adequate to treat superficial wounds and mild illnesses.

Despite the humane treatment at this camp, Soviet prisoners being held elsewhere may not be as fortunate. In fact, some Mujahidin leaders have told ABC News that if the maintenance

of Soviet prisoners becomes a burden, as it did a few years ago, they will return to their earlier practice of executing their Russian captives.

Akmatiar Golbadin (?) is the leader of Hesbi Islami (?) Afghanistan, one of the most powerful forces of Mujahidin fighters.

AKMATIAR GOLBADIN: If Mujuahidin realize that keeping the prisoners alive, it then creates problems and it is useless, without any result, they will not put themselves in danger. So they will decide to punish them.

REDEKER: Zafaradin Khan (?), regional commander of the Hesbi forces in southern Afghanistan, is directly responsible for the prisoners held in his camp. However, the 27-year-old leader disagrees with his chief and vows he will not execute Russian POWs.

ZAFARADIN KHAN [translated]: There are some Russians who surrendered themselves to Moslem forces and took refuge in Islam. They should be treated like any other Mujahidin. As Moslems enjoy certain rights, so should these Russians enjoy such rights.

The second group are those who did not show any willingness to become Moslems. They enjoy complete freedom of opinion and are left alone.

REDEKER: Is there any set of circumstances under which you would consider executing them?

KHAN [translated]: No. As regards this question, we absolutely follow the Islamic commandments.

REDEKER: For now, these are the lucky ones. They are alive and relatively secure. But the future of these Russian prisoners has been jeopardized by their own government. Recently, the Mujahidin agreed to release seven Soviets to the International Committee of the Red Cross for temporary internment in Switzerland before repatriation to the Soviet Union. In exchange, Moscow agreed to allow the Red Cross to visit Mujahidin prisoners. But the Russians broke their word and expelled the Red Cross from Afghanistan. Now it is doubtful that the Afghan rebels will turn over any more prisoners. These POWs have become victims of a Russian double-cross.

What do you want to do now?

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TRANSLATOR: I want to go, if it is possible, to America. Because in the Soviet Union they will put me away.

REDEKER: What about your family in the Soviet Union? Don't you want to go back and see your relatives, your home?

TRANSLATOR: Well, I'd like to, but it won't be possible. It's difficult.

REDEKER: Why to America?

TRANSLATOR: 'Cause there, although the Soviet Union says that America is very bad, radio and other sources indicate that there the people lead a more civilized life. They understand what they are doing. They also do not want war, in Afghanistan or other places.

REDEKER: Do you now consider yourself a traitor to the Soviet Union?

TRANSLATOR: Well, that's how it has come out, a traitor. But we don't think we are traitors.

Yes, I want to return to the Soviet Union because it is my home. My parents are waiting for me. I was born there. That's my homeland. I want to go home.

REDEKER: But no doubt you'll be considered a traitor and you'll be dealt with severely for that?

TRANSLATOR: Yes, they'll treat me badly if I go back to the Soviet Union. Well, people are unaware of what is really going on here. Now if I come back, I don't know what the future has in store for me.

What do I want? I also want to go back to the Soviet Union. I don't care what happens to me there. I don't care. I want to return home. I'm not interested in anything else but home.

DOWNS: How many Soviet soldiers are the rebels holding, Bill?

REDEKER: Hugh, the best guess has between 150 and 200 Soviet POWs now in detention in Afghanistan. And I should point out that just today Freedom House, a U.S. organization supportive of Soviet dissidents, which first brought these prisoners to our attention, asked Secretary of State George Shultz's help in getting these prisoners to the United States.